



SUBMERGED

Bold brush strokes powerfully captured the essence of the 2004 tsunami disaster



Nirmala's images of the tsunami

Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam's *Tsunami 2004-2005* is a moving elegy to those who lost their lives last December. Submerging herself in the media coverage at the time, Nirmala watched the images and read the reports and accounts of survivors. Since she had self-consciously avoided the newspapers and televised news for several years before that, the impact was even more concentrated. This total absorption allowed her to internalise the impact of the disaster and so a creative response emerged.

Seeing the exhibition is an overwhelming experience. The multiple canvases follow similar formats. Painted on an intense medium blue background, ashy black-and-white walls of powerfully painted strokes surround the viewer. In isolation, they would not have the same impact but as a whole, they form a visceral experience.

Each work expresses different dimensions of the same concept to represent that frightening wall of water. By using a roller brush to paint the background, she represented the flat, expansive blue skies that mocked the tectonic movements below. The sky's halcyon appearance had no relation to the surging water that followed, a point Nirmala emphasises in the different textures she uses to depict the water.

For each painting, Nirmala employs different types of brushstrokes and combinations of light and dark. The repetitive format allows viewers to concentrate on the differences between the abstracted forms. Varied movements of water are evoked; some with more frothy whitecaps and others simply form oppressive dark walls of water.

An interesting dimension of the paintings is Nirmala's use of space. Very little room is made for the viewer. Instead, merely centimetres of space form the foreground. The rest is left for the surging waters. Only the flat, blue sky hints of anything in the distance. Sitting in front of the work brings up feelings of helplessness and despair.

A close look at the surface of the paintings reveals the dense texture within each brush stroke. Almost marbled effects can be found, as can rapid strokes made with laden palette knives. The hand of the artist makes itself felt and the sweeping strokes convince us of her passionate engagement with her work.

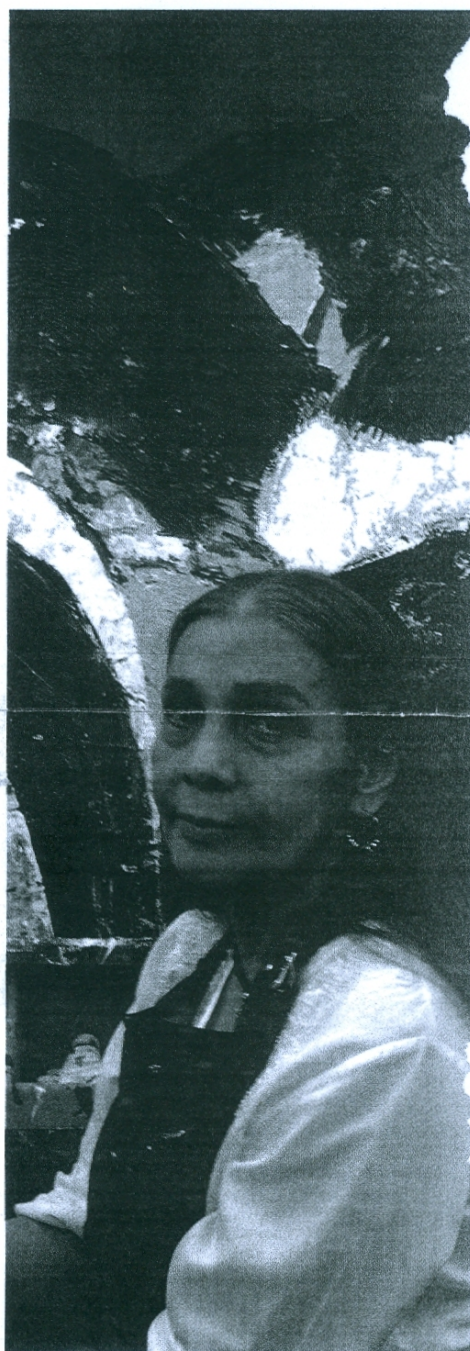
At times, Nirmala's brushstrokes resemble the spare economy of Chinese brush paintings. The commitment to follow the single stroke without returning to make corrections is characteristic of ink painting and Nirmala follows that throughout her work. Often, she returns to cover the original strokes with new strokes but they always add to the work rather than attempt to conceal earlier strokes.

Sometimes, the blocks of black combine to create monolithic forms in the canvas. Patches of white relieve the doom and offer a sense of hope. In other works, white strokes in the foreground serve as the front-runners of a wall of blackness.

Some of the works incorporate newspaper photographs. They help the viewer access Nirmala's creative process and see how she came to engage with the subject matter. Her commitment to justice and her compassionate character have resulted in works that possess integrity and dignity, qualities that have been undiminished through the decades of her practice.

After deducting the costs of the exhibition, gallery and artist's materials, all proceeds from the sale of the paintings will be donated to tsunami-related charities.

Art critic and historian Laura Fan is a lecturer at a local college



Nirmala against a backdrop of one of her paintings

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